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ABSTRACT

College officials often assume that college students of the 1980's are radically different from their counterparts in the 1960's and 1970's, but attitude change is rarely measured. To study perceptions of peer group attitudes over the past decade, the responses of 310 white, incoming University of Maryland freshmen were compared to those of 204 white freshmen who attended the University in 1970. Students completed questionnaires which indicated their perceptions of how most college students felt about persons holding certain beliefs. There were significant differences on 8 of 16 items. Communists, socialists, liberals, persons favoring gradual desegregation, and cigarette smokers were seen more negatively in 1981 than in 1970. In contrast, conservatives, people favoring U.S. foreign policy, and persons favoring premarital sex were seen more positively. Most of the changes were in political attitudes, reflecting a trend toward conservatism. There was little change in racial attitudes: racist attitudes continue to be negatively perceived. The study suggests the need for college officials to test their assumptions empirically rather than relying on myths about student attitudes and behaviors, and to update orientation programs, student activities, and health and counseling services accordingly. (JAC)

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to compare perceptions of peer group attitudes of college students in 1970 and 1981. The responses of 310 white, incoming freshmen attending the 1981 orientation programs at the University of Maryland, College Park, were compared to those of 204 white freshmen who attended orientation programs in 1970. Subjects in both samples completed questionnaires in which they indicated their perceptions of how most college students felt about persons holding certain beliefs. There were significant differences on eight out of sixteen items. Communists, socialists, liberals, persons favoring gradual desegregation, and cigarette smokers were seen more negatively in 1981 than in 1970. In contrast, conservatives, people favoring U.S. foreign policy, and persons favoring premarital sex were seen more positively. The nature of change in student attitudes is discussed and implications for program planning are made.

An assumption that is often made by college and university faculty, staff, and administrators is that college students of the 1980's are drastically different from their counterparts of the late 1960's and early 1970's. The differences that are assumed to exist cover a broad range of opinions, attitudes, and behavior in social, cultural, political, and personal contexts. Yet despite the interest of college personnel in the assessment of student attitudes and behaviors, some feel the emphasis has too often been on researching current attitudes and relying on subjective impressions about change. According to Vacc and Silvestro (1980), attitude change itself is rarely measured. These authors state that "colleges generally have not been self-conscious about assessing changes in their student populations beyond reporting entrance scores and student grades" (p. 14).

One way to examine changes in the college student population is to examine changes in the social climate on college campuses. The social climate, the context in which people operate, is defined by the socially agreed upon norms of what constitutes acceptable behavior. In general, information about the social climate can be important in understanding the phenomenological world of the subject population; or, in other words, the campus seen through the eyes of students. Such knowledge enables predictions and interpretations of attitudes and beliefs to be made with greater accuracy.

Specifically, research on racial attitudes, for example, has found that the social climate and situational context play an important role in understanding the complex relationships between attitudes and behavior. Sedlacek and Brooks (1971) found that there is a difference between what white college students believe are socially acceptable attitudes toward blacks and what they really feel. Though students perceived less social acceptability for racially prejudiced attitudes, they nevertheless held negative attitudes . One

conclusion that might be drawn from that research is that it is important to place attitudes in a broader situational context such as the climate in which they occur.

One way of understanding a given social climate is to ask members their perceptions of what the prevailing attitudes are within that context. Using that methodology, this study is an attempt to assess shifts in the social climate of a university campus over a decade. By focusing on change at one particular campus, the problem of comparing different populations is diminished, and this enables the campus to serve its student community better through planning and implementing programs tailored to the specific needs of its students.

METHOD

In the summer of 1970, a representative sample of 204 white, entering freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) indicated their perceptions of the social values on college campuses (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1971). In 1981, a representative sample of 310 white freshmen entering UMCP responded to an anonymous poll similar to that used by Sedlacek and Brooks in 1970.

Both questionnaires asked respondents to indicate how they thought <u>most</u> college students felt about people holding certain beliefs. The items were based on contemporary issues, racial concerns, and beliefs derived from Rokeach, Smith and Evans (1960).

Sixteen of the original 20 items in the 1970 questionnaire were used again in 1981. The remaining four original items were eliminated in the updated version because they no longer represented relevant campus issues (e.g., "Someone favoring coed dorms ").

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and t-tests for the 1970 and 1981 samples. There were significant differences ($p<.05$) on eight of the 16 items. Communists, socialists, liberals, cigarette smokers, and those favoring gradual desegregation were perceived more negatively in 1981 than in 1970. In contrast, those seen more positively in 1981 were conservatives, those favoring U.S. foreign policy, and those favoring premarital sex.

DISCUSSION

The changes in social climate over the decade of the 1970's can be discussed in terms of three contexts: political, racial, and personal.

Most of the changes found in this study reflect changes in political attitudes. Most notably, there is a trend toward political conservatism that has also been documented elsewhere (c.f. Maeroff, 1978). In 1970, when the study was first conducted, the political climate on college campuses was one of antiwar sentiment over Viet Nam. Many students were angered by government policies, and organized protests and demonstrations on college campuses across the country. In contrast, in the late 1970's and early 1980's there was a growing concern about perceived deterioration in U.S. military superiority and the the impracticality of detente as a foreign policy. Perhaps world events such as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, labor unrest in Poland, and the hostage crisis in Iran may be related to the more negative attitudes perceived toward alternative political ideologies, such as communism and socialism.

Interestingly, though students in 1981 tended to feel college students agreed more with government policy, they still felt students reserved the right to protest when they do not. In both 1970 and 1981 students felt that students disagreed with the item "Protest is never justified." Although a common assumption is that current

college students are less likely to protest than the students of the early 1970's, it might be more useful to look at student willingness to protest on an issue by issue basis, rather than stating blanket generalizations.

In comparison to the political context, there was little change in racial attitudes between 1970 and 1981. Racist attitudes continued to be negatively perceived. Of six items referring to race, only one reflected a statistically significant change: that relating to gradual desegregation. This item is difficult to interpret, however. It is unclear whether subjects were responding to the issue of desegregation per se or to the rate at which it is accomplished. It is therefore unclear whether the decreased acceptance of gradual desegregation in 1981 means that white college students were exhibiting less concern for racial integration. An alternative interpretation might be that they felt unsure whether it should be accomplished rapidly rather than gradually.

There may be some evidence to suggest that the hypothesis of less concern may be correct, however. Students may continue to perceive that racism is not acceptable, but view it relatively more positively than they do other issues. For example, in the 1970 sample, the most negatively rated items were "racist" and "bigot." But in 1981, these items (whose means, however, were not significantly different from the 1970 sample) were no longer the most negatively rated items. "communist" was rated more negatively than both "racist" or "bigot." In essence, the data may be suggesting that white college students currently believe there are worse things one can be than a racist. Racist beliefs were still negatively reinforced, but perhaps not as negatively as other beliefs one could hold.

There is also evidence of changing behavior and values in a personal context. Though current college students may be seen as politically conservative, they may

not be seen as socially conservative, at least with regard to the acceptance of premarital sex. Perhaps the sexual revolution of the late 1960's and early 1970's has had such a fundamental effect on society that the social conservatism of groups like the Moral Majority has not been able to penetrate the social norm. In support of the present study, Vacc and Silvestro (1980) also found that acceptance of premarital sex in college students had increased.

Another change in personal values concerns the decreased acceptance of cigarette smoking. Although freshmen are not likely to be smokers (McKillip and Vierke, 1980; Wechsler and Gottlieb, 1979), they perceived more acceptance for smoking ten years ago. This may reflect the influence of the Surgeon General's report and groups like the American Cancer Society, which have warned about the health risks of smoking. Supporting evidence from Vacc and Silvestro (1980) indicates that as of 1978, there was a significant trend toward not smoking.

Overall, then, it appears that trends in perceptions of student norms vary according to topic. For example, there was a great deal of change politically, but comparatively little change in racial attitudes. Even within a given topic, change is relative. In the political context, there was a trend toward conservatism in many areas, but less so in others such as social acceptability of protest.

Another conclusion that can be drawn is that assumptions about how college students change often can be misleading. Change does not occur equally across all topics and all populations. Administrators, faculty, and others interested in college students might be served better by testing their assumptions empirically than by relying on myths about student attitudes and behaviors.

Survey research of this type may lead to better coordination and planning of services and programs such as orientation, student activities, or counseling and health services. For example, since college students currently perceive smoking negatively, it might be useful to develop programs or workshops on how to stop smoking. Counseling services might be sensitive to the coping strategies needed by students who might feel apart from the mainstream in terms of political and social attitudes. For example, consider the pressures on a student who decides to be sexually inactive in a climate where premarital sex is the norm. Additionally, programs such as orientation could be updated periodically, based on the discrepancy between perceived norms and actual student attitudes and behavior.

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Table 1.

How Freshmen Thought Most College Students Felt About People Holding Certain Beliefs

Item	1970 (N=204) Mean	S.D.	1981 (N=310) Mean	S.D.
atheist	3.28	.89	3.42	.75
bigot	4.16	1.10	4.08	.76
someone pro-labor union	2.73	.88	2.80	.65
communist	3.99*	.98	4.48*	.71
racist	4.18	1.08	4.19	.77
someone favoring U.S. foreign policy	2.86*	1.16	2.53*	.80
someone favoring premarital sex	2.46*	1.08	2.19*	.83
liberal	2.06*	.95	2.40*	.85
against interracial fraternities/ sororities	3.75	1.07	3.75	.90
socialist	3.12*	.92	3.30*	.79
believes fundamental racial differences	3.38	1.11	3.56	1.02
favors U.S. space program	2.11	.97	1.97	.82
smokes cigarettes	2.77*	.72	3.26*	.82
for gradual desegregation	2.63*	.92	2.99*	.94
a conservative	3.22*	.91	2.94*	.77
feels protest is never justified	3.84*	1.15	3.73*	.74

* significant at $p < .05$, using t

(1 = Strongly positive feelings; 5 = Strongly negative feelings)